

Abstract

This thesis places my video installation *Powłamywanymi* (2015) into the context of art by discussing its methods (repetition and breakage) and themes (object, death, body) and comparing it to other artworks and to examples from popular culture that use similar methods and approaches. It explores what elements make the work function as it is and what the vulnerabilities are.

The concept of objecthood is central to this thesis. It attempts to narrow down the meaning of the object even though the nature of objects is very versatile. Object is viewed for example as a utensil, a unique collectible, a strange other, a (human) object of desire and a human deprived of humanity. Violence that is implicit in trauma but also in comedy is one of the prominent themes of this thesis. Destruction of an object and of language are seen as intertwined. Destroying the object removes its function. Same applies with language. Language seems to reveal an otherwise covered phenomenon – objects that break from their limbs so systematically, that it needs to be described by a word of its own. As removing a foot mutilates the table, removing a word from its phrase can make them both meaningless. Finally the object, comedy, language and violence all associate with a human body.

Powłamywanymi's effects can be reduced as follows: it is able to be comical and point to trauma at the same time both of which are based on variations of the same elements: 1. Viewer reflecting themselves on the object because of comical recognition or possessive reflective impulse. 2. Repetition as traumatic/comic effect, and 3. The framework of language guiding the perception.

Keywords: video art, conceptual art, modern art, object, body, language, violence, trauma, comedy, repetition, body parts, table, otherness, death

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Acknowledgements and Vulnerabilities

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This thesis is written in a form of an essay instead of an academic article because as an artist it does not serve a purpose to distance oneself from the position of an active maker to an objective observer. This thesis cannot be viewed as scientific research because of the lack of a method, but it's rather a collection of interrelated ideas concerned with objecthood. It could be developed into the direction of qualitative study through content analysis of works of art containing tables. I have had to narrow down my interests. This work gives a limited perspective to all of the issues discussed, in particular the parts concerning neuroscience which refer to Oliver Sachs' celebrated but very popularized writing only. Also I would like to research feminist performance in relation to how bodies are seen and used as tools in art. These two are part of my interests but I cannot really discuss them in this work. I do not attempt to give an exhaustive view on what an object is and how they function in the context of art, but approach them through different perspectives and doctrines, and compare the views with the exemplar artworks. I have not discussed technical aspects of Powyłamywanymi, as this does not serve my means. Technical details are brought up only to the extent that is necessary to understand what the work looks like.

Pronoun they is used instead of he/she when not referring to anyone particular.

Introduction

Powłamywanymi is a video installation that shows 13 different tables breaking one after the other. The title comes from “Stół z powłamywanymi nogami”, a Polish tongue twister which means “a table with broken legs”. Powłamywanymi, the word for breaking, is a very specific word. Its meaning is tied to objects like tables, umbrellas and ladders that have a broken limb-like part.

The first chapter describes the events leading to the birth of Powłamywanymi, briefly describes its appearance and charts my background as an artist as well as discusses language as a source of inspiration. The second chapter focuses on the object – a central factor for this work. It charts what an object is using approaches from various thinkers. One of the main motives for this work is to study why humans are fascinated with objects. The third chapter discusses materials and materiality and how they relate to perception, interpretation and humanity through one example artwork. The fourth chapter discusses repetition and breakage, how they relate to trauma and comedy and how they can be used as tools to achieve such effects.

1. Background

This chapter describes the making of *Powylaamywanymi* and my journey as an artist to the point where I am now.

1.1. *Powylaamywanymi*

Powylaamywanymi is a black and white 4:3 ten minutes long looping video installation. It shows a simple stage like setting with a table at limelight against black background. Nothing seems to happen but then suddenly the table starts to collapse from its leg/legs until it's flat and broken on the ground. This is repeated again and again with different tables, 12 times altogether. Depending on the table the ways of breaking vary. After the last table the image fades to black and the word *powylaamywanymi* appears in the middle of the screen after which a whole sentence "Stół z *powylaamywanymi* nogami" fills out and is soon accompanied by the translation "polish: table with a broken leg".

The idea for *Powylaamywanymi* occurred to me on 17th December 2012 in Bydgoszcz, Poland. I was there at a film festival and stayed with a host family. The family took me to places, to see sights, to visit their grandmother. We didn't share a common language with the rest of the family, so Piotr, the son, translated all the conversations. I was fascinated by the language that seemed even more difficult than my own and wanted to learn some to be able to thank and say good night at least. The family was amused with my efforts and made me try out Polish tongue twisters, some of which are hard even for the Polish themselves. One of the them was "Stół z *powylaamywanymi* nogami". After a few miserable tries ending all in stutters I finally asked what it means. Piotr shrugged his shoulders saying, "nothing of importance, just a table with a broken leg".

The sentence became of importance after I found out that the longest word *powylaamywanymi* means "to break" only in the relation to some objects in specific situations. Demolishing the object removes its function, the reason for its existence. As removing the foot mutilates the table and makes it unusable, removing the word from its phrase makes them both meaningless. First I

misunderstood that *powyłamywanymi* meant breaking only in relation to tables, which made the foundation for the idea of the work. For an item-specific breakage word to be necessary, the certain item breaking repeatedly has to be acknowledged as a phenomenon. This was a case where repetition creates language while language makes the phenomenon visible. I decided to illustrate that repetition. The phenomenon could be pointed out through collecting different cases of breaking into a concentrated period of time: a video installation.

My belief that *powyłamywanymi* would had meant breakage only in relation to tables proved wrong later in my research. According to Karolina Konieczna the word is used with certain items that have specific parts broken or removed, such as umbrella string, ladder steps or legs of tables, but it's not too popular because of its meandering nature and people tend to use a shorter, more general word "połamanyymi" in its stead. When working with a foreign language, mistakes in interpretation are very common. Even if the statement above is not constricted to tables, it stays valid in a broader context of certain object parts that seem comparable to human limbs. Also it applies in the context of art, not because it is true, but because *it could be true* and can be seen as a narrative method of validation in fiction. Flaw in the system of translation became a fruitful tool. Without my erroneous belief about the restricted use of "powyłamywanymi" I would not had ended up making an artwork with tables breaking their legs.

Jean Baudrillard asserts in *The System of Objects* that tables used to be heavy and carry a strong symbolism for nurturing and motherhood, unlike tables of today that are lightweight, concealable or serve as functional laboratories (Baudrillard, 2005, 47-48). Marx on the other hand deals with tables through the material: wood. He sees the wood as taking form of the table, but when the table takes a form of a commodity it loses its sensuousness and becomes something completely strange, as if it could walk or dance on its own (Marx, 1990, 163-64). Baudrillard's and Marx's views differ notably but both cases point out a change, especially in how society sees and treats the object.

The subject matter, tables breaking their legs, was clear from the beginning. I felt it was something special, something I had not previously encountered. I wanted to

make sure to choose the right way of execution so that the idea would be conveyed in the best possible way. It took almost two years of procrastination to finally decide on the form and realize it.

The visual style of *Powłamywanymi* is black and white and high in contrast. I made the aesthetic choice to support the themes present in *Powłamywanymi*. It creates associations to noir and silent era slapstick concurrently, both associations equally suitable. The 4:3 format suggests the same connection.

Noir is a genre that flirts with the dark side of things. An atmosphere of violence, crime and mystery lingers. In silent era slapstick the comic effect is often based on visual puns, especially exaggerated violence, hence the name. Both of the genres make use of an anti-hero protagonist, either the faulty yet interesting character whose constant internal conflict draws them to good and bad simultaneously in noir (Matt, 2009, 6-7), or the puny and therefore hilarious character who keeps making the same mistakes repeatedly in slapstick (Maak, 2007, 7). The tables of *Powłamywanymi* play both of these roles simultaneously. Violence and comedy proved to relate almost inseparably and are discussed in more depth in the last chapter.

The visual style has received both praise and critique. The critique has been targeted to the work being either too beautiful and thus distancing or too staged and also distancing. I am very aware that the choice of aesthetics partly contradicts with my views of what is important in the process of making art. In this case I found it necessary to film in studio with minimal setup based on two main things: first of all I wanted to eliminate unnecessary distractions caused by the surroundings, which place the table into a context of a space. This provokes questions about the inhabitants of that place/space and might shift the focus from objects to people. Second, breaking the tables in their natural environments would have been technically more challenging.

1.2. What's with the Tables?

Arriving to the point where I currently am as an artist was not painless. An ex-lover once tried to insult me calling me an engineer, a description I previously had

offered him myself. I found this insult fascinating and still embrace it now and then, especially concerning my art practices. Simultaneously it's a perfectly valid statement but also could not be more false. I began as a poet and a pictorialist making images where everything was said through metaphors; beauty, longing, a quest to find something hidden behind the dullness of the everyday. All that mattered was the experience, the emotion. After many years of trying to navigate these overly poetic waters I hit a wall like so many artists before me. Metaphors were reduced to images that resembled a cringeworthy theatre play at their best. Even if the visual form of the image was otherworldly beautiful, there was no denying it: my experiences, my pains and joys were more or less the same as everybody else's, except for those who have it worse. I found that my experience *per se* is not particularly interesting.

I needed another approach to continue making art. I let go of the visual experience and started categorising things in my mind. Details, similarities, differences, words, language, patterns, mathematics, even random debris on the streets. All the things I had scoffed to previously as emotionless or boring. A new world opened to me where repetition was a tool for uncovering anything, where boredom was my main ally. The trick was to resume at the task, whatever it was, long enough and not let go, not to change the method, just keep stubbornly going on until something new would begin to brew below the surface.

While I was in search for new perspectives and methods I started to pay attention to new types of art. That is how I first encountered Ed Ruscha's *Various Small Fires* (1964). I was familiar with his large scale paintings but never knew he had a vast selection of lo-fi artist books in his repertoire. First I came across *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), then *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), and was immensely impressed by them. Ruscha had chosen to abandon artistic expression and document the most mundane things in a very straightforward manner and present them without explanations. Repetition without variation. The method made me alert and I kept digging deeper into Ruscha's work until I found *Various Small Fires*. It shares some qualities with the two other books like repetition as a method and the physical format. Sticking to the format was very important for Ruscha. Even though *Various Small Fires* sports only 16 images plus the title page,

it still has the exact same page count as his first book which left some pages blank. Still it's definitely distinct from the others. The fires portrayed are small-scale, they are often attached to things they are caused by, and finally, fire is an element, it's lively and dangerous unlike buildings and gas stations that are solid and built to serve a function. The most prominent difference though is the last image which is a glass of milk. Ruscha breaks the repetition by introducing a completely new item after parading images of fires one after the other. This random element left me puzzled for days.

Somehow it reminded me of Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003), a black and white film consisting of episodes where famous musicians and actors play versions of themselves while having coffee and/or conversation with somebody. The film has no real narrative, the only thing binding the episodes together is coffee and a recurring chess-pattern. It had been my favourite film ever since I saw it but could not really pinpoint why. Through analysing *Various Small Fires* I realised they both use repetition as their visual/narrative method, and though obscured, have a strong internal logic.

Various Small Fires made me realise what I consider as important in art and how to approach and achieve it. It was comforting to find out that even Ruscha, whom I hold in high regard, had struggled with his artistic expression. As Kenneth Hayes states in *Milk and Melancholy* (2008, 57), Ruscha found preceding and current art movements unsuitable for his means. The attempts to express something unseen through artistic expression or to dramatize life into images that have maximum impact seemed either too much or in vain. Ruscha chose to make his photographic works resemble technical and commercial photography, ones that are most free of artistic value (Hayes, 2008, 59). What happens with a choice like this is that the concept exceeds the artistic expression and manual skill. The whole work could be replicated since the formula is right there, visible to anyone. There is no magical intuition guiding the artist on their path but only a method.

For similar reasons I've been drawn towards artists like John Baldessari. Many of his works are based on strict methods but have arbitrary goals like in *Throwing Three Balls in the Air To Get a Straight Line* which is what it says: Baldessari documented

his throwing attempts of three bright orange balls in photos. Repeating and “failing” an act of nonsense creates an absurd comical impression. At first glance it makes no sense. The meaning emerges from persistent repetition of the gesture that evolves into patterns that somehow resemble language. Baldessari even states that he uses the interaction of language and image to ignite meaning (About the Photographer: Baldessari, John).

The idea for Powłamywanymi was born out of language. Like language, conceptual works of art follow logics that are completely tied to themselves. You could change any variable and the work would still make sense. Just as in language, it's all negotiable. In other words, the tables in Powłamywanymi could be another group of objects without changing the meaning of the work too much.

Powłamywanymi is strictly tied to a method but as I came to discover, no matter how much one tries to reduce a work of art to method, the personal still interferes. I don't evaluate this as good or bad, but see it as an inevitable side-effect of making art – and of humanity.

2. Objecthood

Object as a concept seems clear enough seen through the spectacles of everyday. It's a thing that is or an item to use. These are yet but synonyms. Object in its most concrete form is an inanimate item, something that just exists, doesn't grow, doesn't move unless moved by an outside force. Another approach is to narrow down what an object isn't; it can simply be seen as something unhuman. This approach that includes plants and animals is often found in poetry.

Defining an object becomes more problematic when different schools of philosophy emerge. There is no simple way to describe an object since the definition depends on the context and use. As Peter Schwenger puts it in *The Tears of Things*: "The nature of objects is too protean to be circumscribed by any one approach" (2006, 17). In the most extreme cases even other humans can become things when deprived of their self and reduced far enough into being an other (Bataille, 1998, 56). "There may be some objects that are recognized at birth, or soon after, like faces", ponders Oliver Sacks, "but beyond this, the world of objects must be learned through experience" (2010, 73.) In this chapter I will discuss different approaches to the object.

2.1. Functional Object

Jean Baudrillard examines in *The System of Objects* the nature of how we experience objects, especially furniture, in relation to their functionality and symbolical meanings in the consumer society. Baudrillard is engrossed in what other needs than the functional do objects answer to, and how the objects are interwoven with culture and human actions (Baudrillard, 2005, 2). He sees industrial objects as free from individual whim of human needs, to the development of which their functionality alone is important (Baudrillard, 2005, 7-8). Other objects, like furniture, that are also often isolated to their functions, he sees as more versatile and more ready to answer other needs, like nostalgia or escapism as well Baudrillard, 2005, 77).

Different kind of functionality of objects is found in Māori culture and other archaic societies, as described in Marcel Mauss' classic research *The Gift* (2006).

Objects were believed to contain either spirits of their own or that of their owners. (39.) Each object had an absolute value unlike in today's society portrayed by Baudrillard. Mauss' research on how objects were used as currency in potlach, a precisely organised system of giving and receiving, is especially interesting in opposition to claims that the animistic view of objects is predominantly regressive. Potlach is such a complex system it cannot unfortunately be discussed here.

Surprisingly there are symbolic, almost spiritual meanings still attached to objects in our consumer society. The old-fashioned furniture reflected the family-unit in a patriarchal order where each piece of furniture marked the places and duties of family members and symbolized morality, tradition and authority, whereas modern, more agile and neutral furniture, rid of their moral and symbolic restraints, exist for their functional purpose only, their utmost worth being their organizational value. (Baudrillard, 2005, 13-17.) Baudrillard doesn't claim this as the only way of seeing objects/furniture in our society, and adds that our everyday objects have two functions: their usage and their possession (2005, 92). This especially manifests in the act of collecting. Objects can be emotional investments. Any item, like a table, can become something admirable when seen as a singular item. The notion of uniqueness equalizes the object with animate beings, but with the difference that an item is fully submissive to its possessor. It can be looked at but it never looks back. (Baudrillard, 2005, 94-96.) The object being submissive can be a desired state but also it can cause discomfort. Unresponsiveness is exactly what Freud names to be the cause of melancholia (discussed below).

Powłamywanymi can be considered from the viewpoint of a collection. Collection is based on series but also on differences: the items have something in common, but still each and every one of them is unique, making them collectible. According to Schwenger, possession is most overtly ownership that is concerned with items we use to reflect us back to ourselves, and "we are less likely to focus on a snow shovel... than on... artwork and decorative bric-a-brac". A functional item points to the world: the work accomplished with the aid of the item. (Schwenger, 2006, 75.) Consequently utensil cannot be possessed: the object must first be rid of its functional value (Baudrillard, 2005, 91). Schwenger makes an example of Virginia Woolf's short story "Solid Objects" where the protagonist becomes so mesmerized

by a piece of glass found from the seashore he becomes a collector of pure, unique items (debris, the function of which cannot be named) and gives up his career and life just to possess objects of the sort (Schwenger, 2006, 82-83). The tables of *Powłamywanymi* qualify as dysfunctional objects but what ultimately, however, prohibits *Powłamywanymi* from being a collection of tables is the picture plane which distances the tables and makes it a collection of images of tables. What is the point of a collection of images of dysfunctional tables, one might ask. As Barthes puts it: "What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially." (Barthes, 1981, 4.) It's not the tables, it is the moment of breaking.

Collecting is in fact repetition of possessive act. Objects are not collected only for the sake of objects. A need to collect arises from a lack. For what is collected is not really the objects but the collector themselves, a being out of reach, which the collector tries to grasp by making the objects as their reflection. (Baudrillard, 2005, 92-97.)

2.2. Wholes and Individuals

Paul Weiss divides beings into wholes and individuals. Both types of entities consist of atoms and molecules. The difference is that individuals are various kinds of organic beings that have certain wholes as part of them. Individuals are capable of growth and controlling their parts more or less consciously whereas wholes are not (Weiss, 1956, 345). The division makes humans, animals and plants individuals and e.g. stones, tables and human limbs wholes.

This categorization provides a fruitful framework of reflection for *Powłamywanymi* as well as for other works of art. By making an item appear an individual instead of a whole, a new kind of creature is created: one that is not a functional object but definitely not human either. Part of *Powłamywanymi*'s effect is created by portraying tables as individuals instead of wholes. Their individuality is pointed out first by their quantity in various appearances and then even more by the detachment of the leg, a whole, from the body of the table and links directly to trauma. This is also exactly the phenomenon the title of the work of art is tied to.

Both Baudrillard and Freud condemn it infantile and regressive to envision inanimate objects as animate. (Baudrillard, 2005, 107, Freud, 2003, 9.) In some cases this probably is true. In the context of fiction, though, different rules apply. Means of animism are not used for escapism or substitution, but as a narrative effect to achieve either the impression of the fabulous or the uncanny.

2.3. Language and Things

Words and things relate and dissociate to each other in a constant flux. Thing in its pure being has no name. The name of the thing is only essential for humans to mediate towards understanding of the thing. According to Oliver Sacks, set of neurons might respond strongly to pictures of tables and also to letter string *table* though not to the names of other objects, such as *chair* or *cupboard* (2010, 100). This notion alone does not bring us any closer to the essence of objects. According to Oxford dictionary an object is a material thing that can be seen or touched and tables are pieces of furniture used for eating, working, placing things on. They have one or more legs and a flat top surface. Typical tables are made out of wood but other materials like plastic, glass and metal can be used. Table is a functional item that makes tasks easier. Schwenger discusses Heidegger's views on objects and language saying that by naming things we at the same time point the things to their being but simultaneously they stop existing as pure things. Through the appearance of a thing we try to frame it by naming it and still get nowhere near to the thing's thingness, its true essence (Schwenger, 2006, 22-23). The systematic inability of language to comprehend objects totally resembles the table's leg breaking and the table thus failing to be the functional object it was meant to be.

These kinds of problems arise when things are brought to the realm of language. The issue gets even more complicated when argued that the words in themselves are things or the things are a system of signifiers occupying space similar to language (Schwenger, 2006, 23). These two issues are very interesting in the context of visual arts where things are used to convey a certain idea.

Language sometimes points out phenomena that otherwise would remain hidden. The word "powyłamywanymi" means "to break" but only in relation to certain

objects that have distinctive limb-like parts. It suggests these groups of items to be considered as something different from all the other items: there is a vulnerability so common that it has required word of its own. It is the perfect “whole-separated-from-an-individual” -case. If a vase shatters, the totality of it breaks, it becomes dysfunctional completely and nothing specific becomes detached. In cases of objects like tables, ladders and umbrellas that are assembled from parts it is possible that the item remains somewhat functional even if one of their wholes (“limbs”) is damaged. In a case like this also the word reveals its vulnerability. More specific the word, the easier it is to distort or eliminate its meaning.

2.4. Lacanian Thing

According to Schwenger, Lacan makes a distinction between a thing and a Thing. A thing (german *Sache*) is a product of industry and human action, whereas a Thing (german *Ding*) has more of psychological connotation. The Thing arises from the sensation of otherness and thus has no physical form so it needs to be presented by something else. The Thing is a notion of an object as *another*, separate entity from the one perceiving it. It is *other*, alien by default. (Schwenger, 2006, 31-32.)

In popular culture John Carpenter’s film *The Thing* (1982) resonates strongly with the idea of the Lacanian Thing. Not only is the film named to make the connection but it has actual aliens in it. The film starts off as a very normal and credible portrayal of a group of scientists – relatable and down to earth. The alien is introduced slowly and the characters portray disbelief like the viewer would, making it fit to “the real world” as if discovering any new species. The alien’s ability to simulate any living being including humans underlines the effect of the familiar but very, very *other*.

Another example of the Lacanian Thing is found in *Cares of a Family Man* (1919), a short story by Kafka (*Kootut kertomukset*, 2001, 140-41). In it a word “Odradek” is first introduced and its origin discussed in a manner that makes the word seem real and credible. Only then is the word linked to its counterpart, a highly dubious thing that is claimed as real through the analysis of the word and accurate description of its appearance. It’s a lump of thread with some kind of leg-like structure sticking out of it that allows it to stand upright. The function of

Odradek cannot be named and the protagonist, the dad of the family, wonders if it has previously looked like something else and been broken, but doubts his interpretation immediately. Odradek is a thing with major Thingness attached to it.

The common denominator in Carpenter's *The Thing* and Kafka's *Odradek* is that the thing in them is something out of the realm of our experiences: a literal alien or something that doesn't exist. In both narratives the thing is validated by narrative methods so that we accept the unnatural as something "real". A functional object seldom has thingness to it. Methods to making a functional object to function as a Thing are quite the opposite to the examples above. The realness of a functional object has to be broken.

The Lacanian Thing is closely related to Freud's concept of the uncanny (explained below). The examples above can be considered to have an uncanny effect because they both are built to be credible from a real world perspective. On the contrary the sensation of the Thing can be produced by almost anything that is separate from the perceiver. The Thing doesn't need to be threatening; in the uncanny object familiarity and threat just have to coexist.

When readymades arrived to the field of art they raised opposition precisely in relation to thingness or non-thingness. Sven Lütticken mentions Barnett Newman who was strongly against both readymades and "good design" as forms of art. Dissolving the borders between everyday items and artworks was seen as a threat to "real" art as if accepting a functional object into the realm of art would somehow infect all other works with its mundaneness. Duchamp of course was the receiver of most of the criticism. He succeeded in diverting ordinary objects, for example a snow shovel, into art by exhibiting them at credible platforms, the art institutions. (Lütticken, 2010.)

It is convenient that a snow shovel was precisely the example Schwenger used when defining items that are usually not possessed. A snow shovel was the first object that Duchamp called a readymade. What he did with the shovel was to name it "In advance of the Broken Arm" (1915-64), wrote the title on its handle and hung it from the ceiling. It was not to be interpreted in a romantic or impressionist or

cubist way. (Mink, 2013, 56-57.) Duchamp doesn't give any suggestions how to interpret it instead, so I would argue his intention was to shake the denotation in favour of placing the item outside of its general use and outside of museal contexts.

In this framework the title of the snow shovel cannot be overlooked. Breaking an arm or a leg emerges as something unexplainable but almost casual. The title is phrased so that it's easy to imagine Duchamp shrugging his shoulders indifferently: "So? These things take place." Even he discouraged interpretations they cannot be completely repressed. The shovel could be a tool to break an arm, it could *be* the arm or used as a substitute *for* an arm. From the perspective of language, as discussed above, words are in this case used contrary to their regular purpose: not to name the thing but to unname it: *thing is pointed away from its being*.

Nowadays when readymades have established their position as valid artworks opposition has come to a halt but sometimes the discussion about the relation of a work of art and a thing still emerges. Lütticken quotes Paul Chan saying that "a work of art is both more and less than a thing" and continues, stating himself: "Rather than building a wall between art and thingness, the work of art should be analyzed as just such a sci-fi monster. If objects are named and categorized, part of a system of objects, thingness is resistant to such ordered objecthood." (Lütticken, 2010.) Both the monster and the work of art are able to reach the area of uncertainty. The fluctuation between familiar and unfamiliar is what often creates the tension of artworks containing objects.

Inserting thingness to an item, be it the whole finalized art object (like Cripplewood by Berlinde de Bruyckere, discussed below) or a functional object inside a work of art, seems to make the work more open to interpretation. In Powyłamywanymi the tables are seen as the other, definitely not human but very animate. Their status as functional object is broken by actually breaking them. Breaking the tables not only concretely breaks the table but also breaks the idea of what a table is. Similar effect is achieved in *The Table that Ran Away to the Woods*, a children's book by Stefan and Franciszka Themerson a table comes to life, runs away to plant itself in the ground and starts sprouting leaves like a tree. It has an agenda on which it acts, just like a human but it definitely is a table with

table's desires, longing to be part of what it had been made of: a tree in a forest. Regressive, certainly, but fabulous.

2.5. Freud, Object and the Uncanny

The Uncanny (2003) is an essay and a concept coined by Sigmund Freud describing the feeling that arises from something that is familiar and strange all at once. It is comparable to the Lacanian Thing, but unlike the Thing, it is more bound to perception (in cases of animistic beliefs confirmed) than psychology (in cases of infantile complexes). In fiction, where anything is possible, the uncanny is achieved by convincing the audience that the work of fiction plays by the rules of the reality and only then erasing the very distinction between fiction and reality (Freud, 2003, 15-16), just as in the cases of Odradek and Carpenter's *The Thing*. The highest degree of uncanny is achieved precisely when inanimate things come to life (Freud, 2003, 16).

Melancholia inevitably seems to be connected to the notion of the object. For Freud an object is often a love object, another human. It is someone unavailable or unattainable but not dead. Someone to long for, often from afar. The lost object for Freud is an idea of the other person, their essence, not their actual physical self. (Freud, 2009, 46.) Freud compares the melancholic reaction to mourning which occurs when something or someone is lost once and for all. Mourning goes on for a certain period of time during which the loss is experienced, dealt with and accepted. Melancholia on the other hand lingers on endlessly not willing to accept a loss has taken part in the first place. (Freud, 2009, 44.) Melancholia seamlessly links to possession. As it has become apparent, another being, human nor object, can never be possessed in their totality.

When thinking about the thing as a strange other it is surprisingly easy to experience melancholia. No matter how near, the concrete object always remains distant from its perceiver. To long for an object resembles longing a lost human love-object. A human-made thing, like a table, can be understood in detail through the process of assembling that particular object but in examining the final object its meaning escapes in perception, as it does with animate things. It doesn't respond – it is lost. There is no way of truly owning or knowing the object, human nor item. Only their representation can be perceived (Schwenger, 2006, 22).

3. Why Material Matters: the Living, the Dead and the Very Processed

When making *Powłamywanymi* I didn't pay attention to the materials in particular. I used all the tables I could get and accepted them as such, whatever they looked like. Most of the tables were wooden, some were made out of chipboard and one had a glass surface. Concerning art, all the choices made carry symbolic meanings, intended or not, as the case of Duchamp's snow shovel points out. The materials carry symbolic meanings too. In this chapter I will briefly discuss Berlinde de Bruyckere's installation *Cripplewood* (2012-13) as a case example on how to view natural and synthetic materials, what effects can be attained by using them.

I've encountered Berlinde de Bruyckere's installation *Cripplewood* now twice. First at the Belgian pavilion, Venice Biennale in 2013 and then at the Espoo Museum of Modern Art in 2017. *Cripplewood* is a large scale sculpture made of wood and wax that consists of an enormous fallen tree trunk to which smaller limb-like branches are attached with binds and bundles of cloth. The texture of the branches varies seamlessly between driftwood-like smooth wooden surfaces and more tender-looking parts made from wax.

Cripplewood is a perfect example of an artwork where materials make a difference. Most of the sculpture's surface looks wooden, so wood is probably the first material to be recognized. The wax is sculpted with such precision it's uncertain where exactly the different materials begin and end. With closer inspection the material seamlessly starts to blend into something that looks like human substance. Pieces of driftwood sometimes resemble flesh or bone if they've been in the water long enough. The simultaneous recognition of wood (not human material) and flesh and bone (human material) makes the viewer regard the piece anthropomorphised.

Wood itself has qualities that explain part of the effect of why it's so easy to imagine de Bruyckere's sculpture as a somehow mutilated organic being. Wood is a living breathing material that has latent warmth stemming from its organicity. It has a presence different to synthetic materials (Baudrillard, 2005, 38). In *Powłamywanymi*, wood advances animating of the tables. The idea of wood as

the material for tables adheres even though there are tables made of many other materials. Somehow it seems a table is always more “alive” than something made out of synthetic materials. Baudrillard argues that valuing organic materials as superior to synthetic is based on nostalgia and might not be relevant in the modern society (Baudrillard, 2005, 38). He goes on to state that natural and synthetic materials are not that different despite of their obvious dissimilarities. If a material exists, it is natural. Glass and paper are synthetic but has been naturalized in the passing of time. How we react to materials comes from a ‘value judgement’ (symbolic connotations related to materials) placed on them. (Baudrillard, 2005, 39.) This is an interesting angle when viewed alongside Cripplewood. If the wooden parts of Cripplewood are seen as warm and homely but mutilated and the wax as artificial but perceived as of human origin, the work creates a dissonance between knowledge and perception that creates the unique strangeness to the piece.

4. Trauma Comedy

Powłamywanymi received very different feedback depending of the viewer, ranging from laughter to anxiety to tears. A friend cried, my aunt laughed, some people were very moved, some quite disturbed. I was expecting a lot of variation in the reception of the piece but it took me by surprise that all the nuances I thought there might be were there and felt or pondered by someone. In this final chapter I compare the methods of comedy to symptoms of trauma and elaborate on how they are visible in Powłamywanymi.

4.1. Comedy

Trauma and comedy are not that far from each other. Who hasn’t at least witnessed a laughter so hard that it leads to uncontrollable sobbing? And even the most harsh events can have an element of humor at least when distanced by time and/or presented in a right way. Louise Peacock has researched the relationship between danger and laughter. She states the steps of achieving a comical effect in slapstick as follows: 1. Recognition 2. Embodied Understanding 3. Evaluation of Pain 4. Appreciation. Each step relies on the previous ones. Understanding and evaluation

are instinctive processes that occur after recognition. Then based on those steps the appreciation will or will not follow. (“No Pain, No Gain”, 2010, 96.)

Sometimes the initial reaction to a fatal accident is laughter because of a “wrong comical recognition”. Freud’s view contradicts: when seeing someone fall on the street, an adult represses their superiority into laughter while a child does not (quoted in Hayes, 2008, 171). Though sometimes very inappropriate, it’s one of the human defence mechanisms, an immediate response to a shock produced by the notion that even a minor accident could threaten one’s existence (Hayes, 2008, 174).

Comic reception of *Powłamywanymi* is explained by recognition. If the viewer judges the situation as comical the steps leading to laughter might follow. Tables breaking repeatedly fit the cues of the comic frame if the viewer decides to overlook the ominous soundscape. Also presumptions of the physical realisation of comical characters help to establish the comic frame. Comical character is often portrayed as “the other” (Peacock, 2010, 97). As discussed above on many occasions, tables in *Powłamywanymi* fit to the notion of the *other* and thus are able to fulfill also the archetype of a comical character.

“When audience members view a physical joke, I would suggest that it is likely that they go through an instinctive process of matching their body to the performer’s body.” (Peacock, 2010, 97.) This is what Peacock calls “physical empathy”. I would argue this does not happen only with comedy but with any work of fiction. As Susan Sontag asserts, we project our bodies constantly into the world hoping that its image would return to us (2007, 125). It is in fact the same phenomenon that generates the need to collect.

One of the common factors in both trauma and comedy is repetition. When you repeat an action like walk into a glass door and get hurt, don’t learn from it, walk into a glass door and get hurt again it’s comedy. On the other hand if you are in a relationship and get hurt, don’t learn from it and get into the same hurtful relationship again, it’s not that funny anymore. In comedy repetition enforces the comical effect, in trauma, it is one of the symptoms.

Repetition is what makes the viewer aware of “tables” as a category. The tables start to compare against each other. Their shapes, sizes and materials vary. As their differences become visible, they become individuals. The effect is intensified with the fact that the accidents afflicted on the tables seem sometimes not to have an external reason and look like the table just becomes tired of standing upright. If a leg is separated in the process it distinguishes the table’s “individuality” by pointing to the leg as a whole that is part of the individual no more.

Above we already see how trauma and comedy are tied to each other slapstick being the ultimate conjunction. While analysing Adrian Piper’s performance *Catalysis IV* (1970-71) Hayes links the two together (2008, 125). Piper went on with her daily routines with a large white towel stuffed in her mouth showing no signs of distress. “This blasé attitude”, as Hayes describes, “is a well-known condition of trauma”. The (wrong) response was again the source of comedy and of disturbance. (Hayes, 2008, 126.)

4.2. Trauma

According to Oxford Dictionary trauma is a deeply distressing experience, a physical wound or the emotional shock that follows from either. In *Powłamywanymi* all the tables suffer a physical trauma which, if targeted against a human object, would unquestionably lead to an emotional trauma. Due to reasons stated above it is logical that the viewer places themselves in the position of the table or at least feels empathy towards it. The concept of coda proved useful analysing the threatening effect in *Powłamywanymi*. Coda is a sudden turn of events, an element of uncertainty, an endnote-like thing often found in music or literature that demands reinterpretation of the whole. It is also comparable to the punch line in comedy. (Hayes, 2008, 65.) A major coda in *Powłamywanymi* is achieved through the title: Table is stable piece of functional furniture. Broken (traumatized) legs threaten the stability of the table, and in doing so, threaten the idea of a table. All the individual accidents that occur on a regularity of a trauma, can be considered as minor codas, all of them make the functionality of the table to be reconsidered.

Destruction of things conveys different meanings depending on where, when and how it is happening. In our modern capitalist society it seems to be the normal state. Things aren't built to last or to be repaired to keep the act of consumption necessary. On the other hand demolition can function as a creative spiritual force. As Bataille puts it: "Destruction is the best means of negating a utilitarian relation between man and the animal or plant" (Bataille, 1998, 56). It has to happen when a sacrifice is in question. By destroying something there is no doubt that the subject performing the sacrifice could benefit of the offering. To sacrifice is to consume sans profit (Bataille, 1998, 58). Destroying everything can also be the ultimate way to demonstrate power: to have so much power one can afford to lose everything (Mauss, 2006, 32).

Sacrifices usually consist of organic wholes like animals or plants (Bataille, 1998, 57). In the context of art though sometimes functional objects are destroyed. (It can be argued though that destroying an object in the context of art does not really count as a sacrifice since an artwork can be sold and thus makes itself profitable in the art market.) But in the moment of creation, before the work is exhibited or sold, the act of artist destroying objects resembles someone making a sacrifice.

Great example where material consistently meets a meaning is the case of artists using milk as a symbolic substance and a subject matter. Usage of milk peaked from 1960s onward (Hayes, 2008, 22). Artists got inspired by A.M. Worthington's and Harold Edgerton's scientific and photographic studies of splashes. Worthington selected it to study the behavior of liquid because milk is luminous and evenly turbid and unlike other turbid liquids doesn't settle over time and Edgerton followed (Hayes, 2008, 28-29). The first impression of milk is innocence. It's food for the babies. Therefore it might be surprising that milk was used by the artists as a crucial element to point at a conflict or trauma (Hayes, 2008, 22). Especially the splash of milk seemed to carry a lot of meanings with it. Jack Goldstein's film *A Glass of Milk* (1972) has a glass of milk placed on the table. A clenched fist and an arm are seen on the right. The fist keeps on pounding the table while the milk splashes and eventually the glass topples over. The indirect violence which through the table's surface affects the glass of milk is analysed by Hayes as systematic and calculated aiming towards a certain goal but not taking responsibility of it (Hayes, 2008, 95). Repetition in the film appears as both traumatized and traumatizing.

One of the first images planned for *Powylamywanymi* was a table broken by a falling glass of milk. I was completely unaware of milk phenomenon in art then. The only piece with milk I remember being aware of was *Various Small Fires*, the allure of which is also based on the latent violence hovering over milk. The fires are as described – small. And milk is after all a liquid. The presence of milk is then a threat to each and every fire presented in the book. Coda is displayed here in a very sophisticated form.

Milk functioned as a transition from modernist painting to photo-conceptual art. This might be one of the main reasons why milk became a point of trauma for artists. (Hayes, 2008, 22.) The tragedies performed on milk is what happened to painters themselves in the occurring shift (Hayes, 2008, 121). What makes the use of milk even more hostile is the fact that even though Worthington's study of splashes looked like innocent observations of the behaviour of liquid, it was a study of ballistics, applicable to military purposes. Same goes for Edgerton's studies: they repress the urge to depict the very moment of death. (Hayes, 2008, 109-119.)

Barbara Visser's photographic series *Detitled* (2000/2006) observes the fetishism that surrounds designer chairs by making them dysfunctional. According to Mireille de Putter mutilation transcends the chairs from functional mass produced objects into sculptures ("*Barbara Visser, Detitled 2000/2006*", 2007). Visser's series employs the prominence of a design object. She has selected the most famous and sought after chairs for the series. Even though the images themselves are shot in an apparently neutral way the impression remains restricted to scandalous – how dare the artist spoil such valuable objects? By the act of destruction the images communicate disinterest or even scorn towards design items. The careful selection of the particular objects proves otherwise: they do matter, otherwise they would have not been selected. The oscillation to and fro between disinterest and absolute fetishism makes the series interesting. Baudrillard would note though that the value of the object is yet again mainly psychological.

Baudrillard suggests that passion directed towards objects is in fact "a tempered mode of sexual perversion". Inability to apprehend another person in their totality

leads to deconstructing and fetishizing body parts of the human (woman) (love) object. The love object (woman) becomes reduced to her parts. (Baudrillard, 2005, 107.) Being broken into parts and treated as such has all the potential to cause a traumatic experience. If it's traumatic to suffer a physical wound or to lose a body part, why would it not be traumatic to be *treated as* a body part? This directly connects with performances like Piper's: being repeatedly treated as a silenced object and making the experience visible. Sontag offers another perspective on traumatic *otherness*: freaks in the old freak shows were not freaks of nature but freaks of culture, as an average spectator would be normalized in contrast to the anomaly. The freaks were seen as domesticated *cultural others*, and assumed as objects – thought patterns characteristic to colonization. Freak's physical aberration, usually present at the boundaries of the body, caused problems for categorization and therefore appeared as grotesque. (Sontag, 2007, 109-10.)

Treatment of the physically deviant has been very inhuman. Despite all the information available people who differ from the norm face prejudice even today. As long as this is the case, works like de Bruyckere's Cripplewood are substantial to convey the experience of safely relating with something very *other*. What draws me towards Cripplewood besides the skillful use of materials is the very experience of physical empathy. Cripplewood is by no means comical but the process of matching my body with the body of work occurred nonetheless. Reason for this might be that even though dulled by everyday habits, one's body is the most ambiguous object in the world (Schwenger, 2008, 160). Even it's apparent that no human would ever look *like* Cripplewood, anyone can *feel* like Cripplewood. It reaches two common points of trauma: feeling inadequate and being rejected. Physical trauma exhibited by the sculpture reflects as a psychological one.

De Bruyckere's Cripplewood in Venice Biennale was accompanied by a text by curator and writer J.M. Coetzee. The text is quoted here in its full form because it sums up important issues about materiality and humanity but also deals with very similar viewpoint of disablement as Powyłamywanymi.

Kreupelheut

Cripplewood is not deadwood. Deadwood: in the mythology of the American West, the town of failed hopes where all trails end. Cripplewood, by contrast, is alive. Like all trees, the cripplewood tree aspires toward the sun, but something in its genes, some bad inheritance, some poison, twists its bones.

The lexical tangle around kreupelheut – cripplewood – gnarlwood (gnarled, knurled, knarled are all the same word in variant forms):

- (1) kreupel – kruipen – creep – crouch – crutch (kruk)
- (2) gnarl: gnarled, snarled (knotted)
- (3) Snarl: 1. a snare (trap); 2. a tangle, knot (of hair)

The cripplewood tree that cannot straighten itself, that grows bent, at a crouch; from whose limbs we cut crutches for those who can only creep; a tree of knotted limbs, gnarled, snarled.

Knots are of two kinds: the rational kind, creations of human reason, that having been tied can be untied; and the kind that occur in nature, for which there is no loosening, no solution, no oplossing.

Cripple/kreupel: a word no longer in polite use. Rejected as unclean, it is dismissed back to the world from which it came and to which it belongs, a world of hovels and tenements, of open drains and coal cellars and horse drawn carts and starving dogs in the street. An unwanted word, pressed back, repressed, buried. The cripplewood tree grows out of the buried past into our clean present, pushing its knotted fingers up through the grate/gate behind which we have shut it.

J.M. Coetzee

Adelaide, 14 February 2013

My fascination towards severed limbs can be pointed to a certain traumatic experience after which I became intensely interested in death and breakage as underlying currents in art. The sudden loss of a limb affected me in its simultaneous absurdity and horridity, both, as a maker and a viewer. I took interest in the old Irish traditional song “Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye” and *Blue Velvet* (1986) became my favourite David Lynch film because of the random ear found in the grass. I wrote stories where people lost their arm or leg like losing a hat or a car key. Missing a fundamental limb was exhilarating especially because of the thought of losing something so fundamental and not noticing. It took several years to understand that my eagerness to deal with detached limbs was the result and method of dealing with a traumatic event in which I, by a hairbreadth, prevented an actual limb being detached from an actual body.

Analysing Peter Witkin’s still life photographs Schwenger nears what enthralls me about severed limbs (2008, 159). Witkin has always appeared quite sensationalistic for my taste but it can’t be denied that his use of body parts as signs among other objects has a strong impact: they point to a body, and the thing that ultimately marks the border between the subject and the object is nothing but the residue of a subject – the corpse. Rid of its function and subjecthood, the dead body has, as described by Hayes, ironically now become an object. (2008, 157.) Even the most morbid of things, the corpse, doesn’t get to escape comedy.

Conclusion

Powłamywanymi provided a fruitful framework to research and collect ideas that currently fascinate me or are important for my working processes. There is no simple way to frame what an object is but examining objecthood from different perspectives proved rewarding.

Powłamywanymi's effects can be reduced as follows: it is able to be comical and point to trauma at the same time both of which are based on variations of same elements: 1. Viewer reflecting themselves on the object because of comical recognition or possessive reflective impulse. 2. Repetition as traumatic/comic effect, and 3. The framework of language.

Powłamywanymi had one major vulnerability: I had based it on an assumption of the meaning of a foreign word, *powłamywanymi*, and when my assumption wasn't right it shook the foundation of the work. Luckily the misunderstanding was minor and even the usage of the word was wider than I expected it still fit the concept with slight alterations. Other vulnerabilities can be argued to be matters of taste.

In the light of this thesis it could be argued that Powłamywanymi is as concerned with objects as it is with humans, since these two in this framework proved inseparable. The conclusion is dependant on the selected sources but mainly of context of art. If Powłamywanymi was placed within a broader research that could and would take linguistics and socioeconomic structures in Poland at the time of origin of the word *powłamywanymi* into account, the results could be very different.

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